



RSA TODAY

News for New York State's Rural Schools

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Rural Schools Association of New York State



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RSA TODAY: NEWS FOR NEW YORK'S RURAL SCHOOLS

Christine Reynolds, Superintendent of the Dolgeville Central School District was the winner in our "Name the Newsletter" contest! The RSA Board of Directors were in agreement that Christine's suggestion captures our message of timely and relevant information for our rural school districts (in a catchy and easy to repeat way!) For her creativity and assistance, Christine will receive a free registration to the RSA event of her choice. Congratulations, Christine and thank you for helping RSA professionalize its member information!



The light at the end of this tunnel leads to the summit of Whiteface Mountain in the Adirondacks. The light at the end of the school funding tunnel is coming into focus next month.

STATE AID DECISION EXPECTED BY END OF YEAR

If there is any issue that affects our rural schools more than any other, it's certainly state funding. Many of our school districts are dependent on state aid and the state has historically failed to uphold its constitutional responsibility of providing a sound, basic education to every child; no matter where they are located within the state. Back in 2007 it looked like we'd finally won the battle. The Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit ended in a court approved settlement that provided \$1.9 billion for New York City schools and a plan to provide over \$7 billion in increased aid statewide over four years. The state lived up to the plan for two years, before the recession created the series of aid freezes and reductions that we live with to this day.

Since the state failed to uphold the agreement, the Campaign for Educational Equity (CEE) sued to enforce it. That suit will be heard in Manhattan on November 4th, with a decision expected by the end of the year. Both sides agree on the facts and are simply looking for a legal interpretation and ruling. The state's position is that it lived up to the agreement, because it paid New York City the amount it was owed and that addressing the needs of the rest of the state was not a part of the lawsuit. CEE counters that the agreement and statements made by public officials at the time explicitly indicated that the agreement was to apply statewide. The losing side will certainly appeal until the matter is once again heard by the state's highest court, the Court of Appeals. This round of legal action would not have been necessary if the Court of Appeals had retained jurisdiction over the matter in the original CFE suit, but it declined.

CEE has requested two remedies of the state: Either pay our schools the \$4.8 billion owed them under the original settlement, or order a new costing out study that will reflect today's costs of upholding students' constitutional rights. Your Rural Schools Association is a party to this suit, seeking to provide our children the opportunities afforded in the wealthier school districts in the state. Our position is that a constitutional right does not fluctuate with the state's financial fortunes and a child's right to an education is every bit as sacrosanct as freedoms of the press, assembly or religion. Despite the inevitable appeal of the Supreme Court's ruling in December, news of that decision will no doubt have an impact on the state aid level provided to districts in the 2016-17 State Budget.

Pressure to provide additional aid to small and rural districts will be important, as the tax cap will limit the amount provided by local communities and final restoration of the GEA will predominantly drive money to less needy school districts. The tax cap will not allow even wealthy districts to raise significant new revenue locally, which will increase their pressure on lawmakers to provide them more of the total aid allocation. New York State is in drastic need of school funding reform and whether in the halls of the State Capitol or the halls of justice, your Rural Schools Association is fighting for an adequate and equitable level of support for our students.



RSA on the Road

In the past couple of weeks, RSA has provided presentations at the fall conference of the New York State Council of School Superintendents in Saratoga, the After-school Learning Alliance in East Greenbush, the Genesee Valley School Boards Association in Batavia, the HFM BOCES superintendents in Hamilton and the New York State School Boards Association in New York City. It's time to both relay important and timely information to RSA members and to learn about the needs of our member school districts.

Dr. John Sipple and David Little of RSA and Cornell University present new tools for schools, as well as a financial and legislative update for superintendents attending the fall NYSCOSS Conference.

Want to attend an RSA presentation? In the next couple of weeks RSA will be at the Sydney Central School at 10 am on October 29th (95 West Main Street, Sydney) to present information to the DCMO BOCES superintendents. We will also be in Plattsburgh on November 12th at 6 pm in the West Side Ballroom (253 New York Road, Plattsburgh) to present information on how to sustain quality rural schools. Keep checking RSA Today for future locations!

LEGISLATIVE SURVEY RESULTS

There is a shortage of funds to operate our rural schools. There is a shortage of relief from the never ending onslaught of state mandates. But there is no shortage of issues facing our rural school districts! When your Rural Schools Association asked that you identify concerns and needs that should be included in your association's 2016 Legislative Agenda, you responded in record numbers, with a record number of issues. Your work now forms the list of issues "on our radar and next month, your RSA Board of Directors will prioritize the list, creating the Legislative Agenda that will guide our advocacy efforts in 2016. Thank you for your effort in performing this vital task. The issues are listed below according to their proper category, but in a random order.

FINANCE

- ◇ Full GEA elimination must happen this year.
- ◇ The capital outlay project threshold should be updated from the \$100K (set 14 years ago) to \$200K.
- ◇ The tax cap must be reformed: It should be decoupled from the Consumer Price Index. (We got some changes to how PILOT affect the cap and for BOCES capital projects, but underlying damage remains when the cap is allowed to virtually eliminate local funding.)
- ◇ Schools should be allowed to create a Teachers Retirement System (TRS) reserve and TRS and ERS should be reformed. Tier 6 hasn't really kicked in, (with call backs of laid off employees) Schools and employees need portability for today's more mobile workforce.
- ◇ The state should permanently end the recalibration of capital project interest rates that can underfund capital projects midway through paying for their bonds.
- ◇ The state should completely fund Pre-K transportation aid and expand aid for pre-kindergarten.
- ◇ Rural schools need afterschool program funding and transportation aid for afterschool programs.
- ◇ All schools (and particularly high need districts) need permanent authority to use post-employment employee reserve funds (EBALR) for current costs.
- ◇ There should be a special aid category of "Small But Essential Schools" (like California) to address comparatively higher costs when schools must provide state curricula in a district that cannot realistically merge with a neighbor.
- ◇ ERS and TRS retirement system contributions should be the responsibility of the state. Public schools are a state constitutional responsibility and this shift would put state versus local costs in line with other states.
- ◇ Schools need categorical aid for professional development to implement the Common Core Learning Standards.

STRUCTURAL EFFICIENCY

- ◇ State law should blend the tax rate for school district mergers, so that there is a permanent change in aid status with no eventual drop off.
- ◇ State law should eliminate the straw poll when districts consider merging or consolidation. All involved school boards vote to authorize, then hold a vote of the entire proposed district, rather than straw polls and positive public votes in each community.
- ◇ Rural schools need incentive aid for shared resources outside of BOCES; particularly when they partner with higher educational institutions.
- ◇ The state should increase technology flexibility for instruction, particularly by certifying instructional programs as well as teachers. There is a need for greater access and authority for digital learning opportunities, as well as greater community access to broadband.

- ◇ Rural schools need authority to facilitate college credit collaboration.
- ◇ Schools need to be able to tuition high school students to other high schools without it raising collective bargaining issues.
- ◇ Schools need the community option of regional high schools and magnet schools for art, or math and science to be shared between districts.
- ◇ There is a need for the ability to conduct collective bargaining regionally, throughout an entire BOCES area, rather than by individual district.
- ◇ Rural schools need expanded learning time (longer school day or year) and the funding to support it.

MANDATE RELIEF

- ◇ There is a lack of legit mandate relief to date and new mandates continue to be added (latest being AED replacement, where the manufacturer gets to declare old ones out of date and schools must replace them, despite never being used, in workable condition and having good batteries.
- ◇ Special Ed costs should match fed requirements. Current costs *are so high that they are defeating the opportunity to provide AP and college courses.*
- ◇ Waivers for Independent APPR evaluators are a rural school *imperative.*
- ◇ Schools need an APPR “reboot”, but administrators, board members and educators are also experiencing the fatigue of constant change.
- ◇ The state needs one unified state approach to opt outs.
- ◇ Rural schools need greater lead time when mandates are imposed. They should not be imposed at least until the following school year.
- ◇ The state should prohibit mandates imposed on districts that are not specific to districts, but include them (such as carbon monoxide monitoring.)
- ◇ Schools need faster approval times at SED Facilities Planning. It currently takes upwards of 44 weeks to gain approval.
- ◇ Teacher evaluations should be decoupled from state student assessments.
- ◇ Prevailing wage laws should be reformed to reflect the true cost within that community and not those of the nearest large municipality.

ISSUES AFFECTING US FROM BEYOND OUR WALLS

- ◇ Teacher recruitment: The recession, the governor’s toxic rhetoric and layoffs have scared off prospective students, leaving shortages in rural areas.
- ◇ The proposed \$15 minimum wage could be financially crippling to rural schools and should be rejected.
- ◇ The state should continue to reject private school tuition tax credits or any expanded number of charter applications.

RSA in NYC



Dozens of convention attendees stopped by the RSA booth to share information and concerns on behalf of their districts. Several RSA Board of Director members gave their time to serve our members by staffing the booth.



RSA Executive Director David Little served as MC for the NYSSBA Convention Kick Off in New York City.



RSA co-hosted a school funding breakfast symposium in conjunction with the NYSSBA Convention in New York City.



RSA Breakfast: Experts in school funding and fiscal policy from Princeton, the Empire Center and the Citizens Budget Commission spelled out the fiscal plight of school districts and the changes needed to adequately prepare for their future.



Beverly L. Ouderkirk: Who Is the New “Rural Regent?”

Ask that question to newly appointed Regent Beverly L. Ouderkirk and you'll learn the following: She is the proud, single mother of three adult sons, mother-in-law to two wonderful elementary teachers, and grandmother to six unique grandchildren. Her career in education began in 1961 when she was appointed to her first position as a kindergarten teacher. Since then she has progressed through 17 years of teaching regular and special education. During those years she was employed by two rural districts: Weedsport CSD and Jordan-Elbridge CSD as well as a BOCES, then called Onondaga-Madison-Cayuga BOCES.

In 1981, she moved to her first administrative position as an Elementary Principal at Gouverneur CSD (enrollment: 1900). She was promoted to Director of Elementary Education/COH Chairperson and then Deputy Superintendent, all at Gouverneur Central, over a six year period.

Her next significant move was to the position of Superintendent of Schools at Morristown CSD (enrollment: 500). A short stint as Superintendent followed at Tioga CSD (enrollment: 1325) and then she moved on to Valley Central SD (enrollment: 5000+) in Orange County. Lured by the challenge of leading and managing a larger educational organization with a direct SED linkage, Ms. Ouderkirk was appointed District Superintendent at Genesee Valley BOCES with centers in the small city of Batavia and the rural district of Mt. Morris. Her responsibilities grew as she reached out to her 22 rural districts and one small city district. Upon her first retirement in 2002, she accepted challenges as a consultant, interim superintendent, and shared superintendent at additional rural districts: Sodus CSD, Morristown (second time), St. Regis, Brushton-Moira, and Clifton-Fine. She has also served on the staff of the Superintendent Development Program, as a mentor to new superintendents, and as a School Board Member at Morristown.

After 50+ years in public education, this past spring Beverly Ouderkirk faced the opportunity of becoming a member of the NYS Board of Regents. After searching the web for additional info about the Board of Regents and its roles and responsibilities and assessing family responsibilities, personal goals, and the current state of public education in New York, she accepted this challenge and was appointed a member of the NYS Board of Regents representing Judicial District IV, becoming the “Rural Regent” effective April 1, 2015 for a five year term.

Known for years as focused on “putting children first,” Ms. Ouderkirk has lived by that credo in decision-making, large and small, as an individual and as a leader of others. She assumed her new role with a determination to become familiar with as many districts in her JD (consisting of 11 counties, 6 BOCES regions, and 114 school districts) as possible with a focus on students and their learning opportunities. Initially, she averaged 1000 miles per week. Among her visitations to date are a number of Listening Tours across the North Country with parents, students, and educators in communities including Gouverneur, Indian River, Lake Placid, Saranac Lake, Tupper Lake, Ballston Spa, Potsdam, Fort Edward, Schuylerville, Amsterdam, Massena, the Little River School, and the Mohawk Elementary School including the Tribal Council with other visits still pending (Elizabethtown and Plattsburgh).

She met with former Regent Dawson, has attended student forums, celebratory events, and spoken at graduations in several locations including the Rome School for the Deaf and the SLU Summer HEOP graduation as well as meeting with legislators, School Board groups, NYCOS leadership, the NYSUT General Assembly, P-Tech Programs at HFM BOCES and Malta, and the FEHB New Visions Program on Government. She has

spoken at our annual Rural Schools Conference, the Mid-Hudson School Study Council, Area 6 School Boards Association, NYSAWA panels, the SLU Constructivist Conference which focused on Poverty, and engaged in a video conference with parents. She has invitations booked with the New York State School Counselor Association in November and Orange County School Boards Association next June. According to Regent Ouderkirk her over-riding goal was and continues to be to listen, to learn, and to understand the issues from the perspectives of others and to provide unfolding info as appropriate.

The new Rural Regent quickly identified the large challenge of learning the ropes of survival and accomplishment as a Regent. She constantly found herself comparing the operations of the Board of Regents with her previous experience as a superintendent of schools and as a school board member. The normal local practices and procedures, in her opinion, differ greatly from the Albany model. Learning how to get an item on the agenda and how to access needed info were among her first lessons as a Regent. Understanding the mechanics of effective communications within and between the Executive Office, the Legislature, SED, the Board of Regents, and the field is no walk in the park. Recognizing the impact of Albany politics on the functioning of the Board of Regents' efforts to carry out their constitutional responsibilities looms large before us.

A prime example of this would be the September revisit to the new APPR law, which was written into law as part of the state budget this past year. The political machination of attaching positive modifications to the law made the vote on the temporary regulations even more cumbersome; i.e. specifically adding the hardship waiver for the benefit of rural and one building districts which could benefit from the waiver for the independent evaluator (distinctly a plus and an RSA priority) and the creation of an appeal process for teachers whose cumulative evaluations were fraught with aberrations was also welcome relief for all districts. Unfortunately, these vital elements were attached to the seriously flawed APPR law.

The Regents were faced with whether to accept the modifications knowing a “yes” vote also meant making the teacher evaluation law one step closer to permanent status or voting “no” in the face of two aspects that were received as positive moves for small and rural districts. According to Regent Ouderkirk “This truly placed us, individually and collectively, in a serious quandary when we agreed the law is seriously flawed and detrimental to children. Which choice would you have made?? To sell out for a bone or two and accept the flawed law permanently or vote against implementing a bad law in its entirety? In the matter of “right” vs. “right” just where would you hang your hat, or your head?”

She adds, “This is a major challenge as a Regent...determining where to place your trust and whose advice to accept? I defer to my old question as my guide along with my “moral compass”. Are these recommendations coming before us in the best interest of our students and of public education?”

Regent Ouderkirk feels that the Board of Regents are continuing to seek common ground that would allow them to re-build the framework of public education in NYS. She has requested that you contact her whenever you have a concern or experience that might inform state educational policy. She can be contacted at Regent.Ouderkirk@nysed.gov or by calling (315) 212-0161.

SAVE THE DATE:
**July 10-12, 2016 RSA Conference in beautiful
Cooperstown, NY at the Otesaga Resort Center.**



Check the Rural Schools Association Website
www.RSANYS.org
for details in early May 2016.